

Frederick Melo, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*

On Thursday, Ya Landa Kinchelow will celebrate the 300 hours of physical labor she's put into her new Habitat for Humanity home on St. Paul's York Avenue by accepting a Bible straight from the hands of former President Jimmy Carter.

The former president is asking Twin Cities residents to volunteer alongside Habitat workers this week in a five-day homebuilding effort targeting urban neighborhoods hit hard by the foreclosure crisis. He'll arrive Wednesday and cap his two-day visit to Minneapolis and St. Paul by offering Bibles to families enrolled in the Christian nonprofit's home-buying program.

Kinchelow can hardly wait. "I'm more self-sufficient than I thought when it comes to power tools," said the single mom and first-time homebuyer. She said her sons, Tayler, 15, and Dale, 12, are looking forward to no longer having to share a room.

"I understand the method of (Habitat) wanting us to do the sweat equity," Kinchelow said. "Because going from renting to owning, you're going to be responsible for the repairs. ... It's amazing to see it happen and to know that I'm actually contributing to building my home."

She'll have help. Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter will join former Vice President Walter Mondale, Twin Cities humorist Garrison Keillor, Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., and 2,000 volunteers to rehab boarded-up foreclosures and build homes from scratch in North Minneapolis and the Payne-Phalen neighborhood on St. Paul's East Side.

Habitat for Humanity, the campaign kicks off today with an all-day celebration at the Mall of America. The effort focuses on 26 homes. Volunteers will refurbish nine foreclosure properties and build five homes. Those 14 properties will be sold to low-income homebuyers with no-interest, 30-year loans.

Habitat workers also will lend a hand to a dozen elderly and disabled homeowners who need help outfitting their properties with wheelchair ramps, siding or a fresh coat of paint.

Twin Cities Habitat President Susan Haigh said abandoned, rundown properties work against uniting neighbors. "It's discouraging," said Haigh, who made affordable housing one of her chief

concerns during her 10 years as a Ramsey County commissioner. "It decreases property values. It increases opportunities for crime, and it just takes some of the wind out of the sails of the neighborhood."

Twin Cities Habitat has raised nearly \$2 million through sponsorships and hopes to draw 600 volunteers per day for the largest homebuilding effort in its 24-year history.

Habitat spokeswoman Kristin Beckmann said volunteers are encouraged to fill out online applications detailing their interests and abilities at tchabitat.org.

Beginning Monday, volunteers will gather at 7 a.m. each weekday at the State Fairgrounds in Falcon Heights for logistical updates, a morning devotional and brief remarks. Buses will take them to North Minneapolis or St. Paul's East Side, with construction lasting from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. daily.

Habitat officials say the need is urgent, as the foreclosure crisis has left families homeless or doubling up and urban areas grappling with vacant, eyesore properties. Statewide, fewer than 6,500 homes were foreclosed upon in 2005, at the outset of the crisis. Since then, more than 100,000 homeowners have lost their houses, averaging 20,000 foreclosures per year, according to the Minnesota Housing Partnership.

There are, however, modest signs of improvement. Delinquencies on primary mortgages fell slightly in the first two quarters of 2010, welcome news after five years on the rise.

Carter, who turned 86 on Friday, is Habitat's most famous volunteer, having first donated his time at a Habitat site in Americus, Ga., in 1984. Since then, the former president and his wife have devoted a week each year to Habitat projects in the U.S. and overseas.

The Carters are expected to arrive Wednesday in Minneapolis. That evening, Carter will deliver remarks at the "World of Hope" gala at St. Paul's RiverCentre. On Thursday, he'll repaint the exterior of a house on the East Side of St. Paul before leaving for Birmingham, Ala.

Carter spent two nights in an Ohio hospital last week after being rushed from a plane with stomach pain. Upon his release from the hospital Thursday, the Carter Center issued a statement describing the problem as a gastric viral infection, which had cleared up.

Carter, who was president from 1977 to 1981, won the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize for his human-rights and conflict-mediation work around the world.